

My friend Andy Odom tells the story of a man he knew of years ago who was something of a barfly and self-styled evangelist.

He would sit at the bar and make small talk with whomever he met, and if all remained relatively kind-spirited he would simply blend into the crowd, watch a ball game or whatever was on television and just be one of the guys.

But, if the conversation turned mean our hero would perk up and listen. If it involved gender roles or sexuality or anything that had even a whiff of biblical literalism, he would sidle into the conversation, listening for the Bible to be used to demean or marginalize someone, and as the conversation progressed, he would lie in ambush, waiting for the inevitable appeal to the authority of the Scripture to solidify whatever claim was being made.

Then he would pounce. He would insert himself into the conversation with the words, “I’ve been looking for some Bible-believing Christians. Are you all Bible believing Christians?”

Having been suckered in through his earnestly sincere demeanor, the unsuspecting adherent to questionable biblical authority would generally respond by taking the bait. “Yes I am.”

Just to be sure, our hero would then set the hook: “I have been looking for me some Bible-believing Christians – now you’re sure you’re Bible-believing Christians?”

As soon as person across the bar affirmed his or her status as a Bible-believing Christian, our hero would spring the trap:

“Great! I’ve some sledgehammers in the truck, let’s go over to the county jail and release us some captives!”

This is when the hapless victim would generally begin backing away.

Our hero would press the question: “you said you believed in the Bible? Well doesn’t the Bible proclaim release for the captives?”

Well, what about it? What *does* the Bible say about release for captives? Or sight for the blind? How about freedom for the oppressed?

For the Biblical literalist, I suppose the answers are at least clear if perhaps a bit distasteful where the release of prisoners might be concerned, or the freedom for the oppressed. The directive one would follow would be easy enough to understand because understood biblically, both of these concepts would hearken back to the ancient Israelite practice of jubilee, where every so often, slaves were freed, and land was returned to its original owners – it was a sort of way of assuring that nobody was ever permanently on the outside. It was a way of assuring, not necessarily that poverty was eliminated, but that slavery and debt slavery were not a permanent part of the way of life of God’s people. Though it was commanded by God in Leviticus, there are no records that indicate it happened. But it was important enough to their identity that it made it into the Law.

Now, for those of us who take guidance from the prophet Nehemiah, who instructs us to seek interpretation of scripture using its own pages as our guide, well, I’m not sure it is particularly easier.

Jesus’ sermon in his home synagogue was something else.

I was invited back to preach at my home church a couple of times. The last time was at least ten years ago. I'm not sure what I said.

Luke says they were read to throw him off a cliff.

I guess I got off easy.

Luke uses this story a little differently from Matthew and Mark. They place this story later in their telling of the gospel. For them, it's just a tale about a sermon gone wrong; every preacher has one. Jesus merely offends, the people have no faith and only a handful of folks get healed.

For Matthew and Mark, nobody is hurling anyone off a cliff.

Luke raises the stakes. This story is early in his telling of the Gospel narrative, and it is a story designed to offend because it is a *prophetic* story.

It is a prophetic story because it suggests to its hearers that there is a way that God wants to see people go, and it is not the way that the hearers are going.

Luke puts this story early, right on the heels of Jesus's baptism and temptation narratives because he wants to set a tone right from the start: the nature of Jesus' teaching and ministry is to be *prophetic*.

It is not the prophetic preaching necessarily that offends Jesus' hometown. It is rather the radical scope that his sermon suggests for God's grace that sends them, as it were, over the edge. Anyone paying close attention would have heard Simeon's pronouncement in the temple and the citation of Isaiah earlier as hallmarks that Jesus ministry is going to be radically inclusive, with salvation extending to all the nations, which is just a way of saying all the people.

New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson puts it this way:

“It is this veiled intimation that the prophet would be for all and not just for them – and in the reader’s understanding, that God’s visitation and salvation were to be for the poor and oppressed of all nations and not just for Jews – that arouses the neighbors’ wrath, impelling them to fulfill Jesus statement: he is not acceptable in his own country because his ministry extends beyond that of his own country. Luke thus provides the last part of the prophetic pattern, that of rejection by the people.”¹

For those of you paying attention here, it is no doubt clear what is going on: Jesus has quit preaching and gone to meddling.

Prophecy offends because prophecy dares to state that how it is now is not how it always will be, and for those who are comfortable now, how it will be is not necessarily going to be comfortable or easy.

Make no mistake about my prophetic tendencies today. If I fall anywhere in this story, it is with those who would hurl Jesus off a cliff because his sermon chides my status as a relatively wealthy, relatively safe and relatively comfortable person. That I suspect, is the status of most of us gathered here.

Prophetic preaching is not easy to hear for those of us from whom the prophecy demands action.

I have never been a biblical literalist, so I don’t fully understand the grip of that particular sin. But literalism is sin because it is idolatry – literalism sets our fixed notion of the words above God’s living Word.

But for most of us, the meaning of this passage doesn’t involve hitching the pickup to a prison wall to engineer a jail break. Nor am I under the illusion that glasses are no longer

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson. *Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991) 82

going to be necessary for those who can't see, and as one walking around with a substantial hearing loss, I am well aware that the coming of Jesus hasn't removed my need for a hearing aid. But we miss the point if we dwell on the infirmities.

When Jesus cites Isaiah and claims the scripture is fulfilled, the whole world is turned upside down. The outsiders were going to be let in, the infirm are going to be made whole.

That's what offended! That's what had that congregation ready to throw him off a cliff... Jesus messed with their sense of being special and set aside because he just said all these marginalized people are going to take over the church.

Prophecy has a tendency to offend.

If God is going to *claim* all of these unwell, unwhole, unclean people... well, what does that leave us?

For some of us, it means we have to give up the category of outsider – clinging to our separation can be as addictive as leaving people out.

For all of us, it means that forgiveness extends further than just the folks we like.

It means we have this extraordinary calling to be more than we think we can.

Of course, that way of life is often caricatured as idealistic and unrealistic, and

Christianity has always found to ways to deal with the idealistic and unrealistic.

Douglas John Hall describes both in his book, The Steward, a Biblical Symbol Come of Age.

Here is how Hall suggests we have managed the enormity of the calling of Jesus' sermon in Nazareth: one way is to exercise what he calls theocentrism and the other is to rely upon Christian humanism.

Now these are grossly simplified but here is what he means:

With *theocentrism*, we can push it all off to the sweet by and by. The function of the church is to point the world to God and as long as we are doing so, we can trust that folks will do what they need to and even if they don't, as long as we are winning converts to Jesus, we're doing what the Lord requires. All will be made well in the kingdom, which is at some point yet-to-be determined. Winning souls for Jesus is the point, not alleviating suffering in the here and now, because clearly, the poor will be with us always. Maybe you've heard this one?

Option two, *Christian humanism*, is a bit more sympathetic to the poor, but has little hope for resolving the present problems of the world. Sure, they're insurmountable, but that shouldn't stop us from throwing everything we have at sharing the plight of the poor and oppressed. Where *theocentrism* can be caricatured as winning souls for Jesus, Christian humanism can be accused of throwing money, food, etc at a problem idealistically hoping to make it go away. I'm sure you've seen this too.

Neither approach can contain the Gospel.

The point of the gospel according to Hall, requires us to understand that the one calling us to win souls or feed the hungry is the one who preached his way on to a cross for our sakes.

The end of the sermon wasn't the cliff in Nazareth, it was the cross in Jerusalem.

And so it is that any prophetic message we may hear must shared in terms of a costly grace.

It is as easy to declare that everyone is welcome and that God has broken down the dividing walls of hostility and made us ministers of reconciliation if all we must do is win souls for Jesus or give money.

But putting our whole selves on the line is another matter.

That means that forgiveness and grace can't be cheap. And so it requires breaking down the barriers of captivity within *ourselves*, recovering *our* sight, leaping to dance with joy in spite of *our* lameness, and believing we have been freed from the oppression of *our* own sin and pain. *The Jail-Break is for us!!!*

The prophetic word requires the hearer to give up something... to give up old grudges... or old prejudice... or old hurt. The prophetic word is not easy to hear because it means *we will be changed*.

A little less than twenty years ago, I walked around a cemetery in Scotland where the victims of the bombing of Pan AM 103 are buried. Their families placed stones remembering them.

A while back, you may recall, the terminally-ill Pan Am 103 bomber was released on compassionate grounds by the Scottish government in order that he could go home to die. He returned home to a hero's welcome.

I was offended. Many Americans were offended.

When I e-mailed back and forth with Marion and John, the wonderful couple in Scotland who offered me enormous hospitality during my exchange, Marion expressed her surprise that the we Americans didn't understand that it was the value of compassion that motivated the Scots' action.

"No," I replied, "It was the hero's welcome that offended us."

“Well,” Marion said, “does that diminish the need for compassion on our parts?”

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” said Jesus, “because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim *release* to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Are there any Bible-believing Christians in here?

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.